

Coalition of Innovating Congregations

A quarterly newsletter

Success Stories: What Does Success Look Like?

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The Coalition of Innovating Congregations is newly defining success for learners

Innovating congregations continue to launch new models of Jewish education. They are already seeing success in their individual learners and families.

What does success look like? Educators see success when learners:

- Demonstrate an ongoing relationship with *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*
- Apply Torah to their daily lives
- Use a Jewish moral compass to help mend the world
- Take spiritual journeys rooted in Jewish tradition

As innovative congregations strive to provide the best educational experiences for their learners, they know that they must take time to notice the success in their communities and reflect on what they observe.

Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (RSNS)

► ► ► AN ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH AM YISRAEL

"They weren't the most likely family to be our success story," Rabbi Jodie Siff said of Carol, who is not Jewish, and her family. Carol and her secular Israeli husband first came to the synagogue because they were interested in nursery school. They have since connected much more deeply with RSNS and Judaism.

As their children grew out of nursery school, Carol and Avi decided to join RSNS's *B'Yachad*, a Shabbat morning service and education experience for families. Through their participation in this program, the couple and their four children have become deeply enveloped into the community. "At our synagogue," Rabbi Jodie explained, "everything is focused on belonging. We try to infuse a sense of *Am Yisrael* into everything we do." And Rabbi Jodie saw that connection when Carol's 10 year old daughter, Sophie, walked into the synagogue and said, "When I walk into this building, I just feel so *good*."

As a result of feeling cared about, the family decided to take each of their four children to the *mikveh*. Recalling one of the conversions, Rabbi Jodie said, "I think he was the first kid to do a cannon ball into the *mikveh*!"

Ultimate Success: Learners' Lives Today and Tomorrow

The success of Jewish education is measured by its impact on a learner's life. A guiding question asked by innovators: In what ways does our educational experience enable learners to pursue Jewish lives of meaning and purpose?

Some results in learners will not be visible for years to come. But, there are successes that can be observed now.

Innovating Congregations balance attending to long term results (e.g. in five years) and short term results (observable impact now).

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Carol's family is also one of the most active members of the *Kehillah* program, a congregation-wide experience where each member is placed in a *kehilla* for 6 events during the year.

"Belonging to community is about connecting different segments; it's about connecting the different parts that touch our families," Rabbi Jodie explained. "Carol and her family feel completely aligned to every part of our community – to the synagogue as a whole, to their grade levels at *B'Yachad*, to the larger community through participation in our food coop, and to other learners of all ages and levels through our *Tefilla Brerah* program."

TALKING ABOUT SUCCESS

Have the success conversation. Ask parents/guardians, teachers, learners and lay leaders to imagine five years from now. What would they see and hear when they meet an ideal learner from your congregation in the supermarket? What would make you say, "Our educational experiences have been successful"?

When having the success conversation, offer the caution, "You can't have it all. You'll have to make some tough decisions." Work toward consensus. With a shared vivid picture of success, you can make critical decisions about teaching and learning. Try these idea starters. We'd be very proud to see our learners are on a journey of...

- * Demonstrating an ongoing relationship with *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*
- * Applying Torah to their daily lives
- * Using a Jewish moral compass to guide actions to mend the world
- * Exploring a spiritual life rooted in Jewish tradition

Forest Hills Jewish Center (FHJC)

▶ ▶ ▶ APPLYING TORAH TO DAILY LIVING

Educational Director Lynn Lancaster tells the story of three families that apply Torah to daily living as a result of focused family learning and caring relationships.

When FHJC began the process of re-imagining its educational model, they formed a task force and invited Sandra to be a part of it. Lynn remembers, "She was one of the parents that dropped off and picked up. At the time I really didn't know her well. But my team saw that she had something important to bring to the community. We began to go on a journey [of re-imagining our educational model] as a community. And through that process of participating in our journey, Sandra began her own journey and her family became a part of that journey as well."

Because of her participation on the RE-IMAGINE taskforce, Sandra grew from one of the parents that dropped her children off at religious school to the head of the school board. "But it was much more than her participation in the synagogue," Lynn explained. "Sandra and her family brought Judaism into every part of their lives." She began to learn Hebrew, then to read Torah, and then became bat mitzvah. Sandra and her 15 year old son are now regular members of the synagogue's daily *minyan*. The family joined the synagogue on a trip to Israel.

"But I can't tell Sandra's story without telling you the story of others. There was really a core of families that went on this journey with us." Lynn recalls two families in particular that demonstrated personal growth and found meaning in making Judaism a part of their daily lives. "These two families began with minimal Jewish knowledge and observance. Today, they have kosher homes and Shabbat has become a part of their regular lives."

"It's more than Shabbat and *kashrut*," Lynn pointed out. "It's the deep connections and relationships that they have built. Through the redesign of our educational model, we began to offer new adult learning opportunities. Through that learning, these families were able to develop deep relationships with the rabbi, with myself, and with each other. I believe

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Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST)

► ► ► **USING A JEWISH MORAL COMPASS THAT LEADS TO ACTION**

Sarah and Michelle decided to join CBST after they adopted Aaron. “In that way,” remembers Melissa Simon, Director of Children’s Education at CBST, “They were a pretty typical Jewish-American family – an interfaith couple joining a synagogue so that their child could get a Jewish education. And they have to choose between soccer practice and religious school.” But, this family was able to find much more at CBST.

You Shall Teach Them Diligently to Your Children (Duet 6:7)

When asked to tell a story about success in learners, all congregations interviewed for the *Success Newsletter* spoke about children and families. Not surprising.

When trying to achieve learner outcomes that nurture what a child does, values, knows and has a sense of belonging to, it is clear that the family plays a critical role. Innovating congregations are abandoning sporadic family events and replacing them with regular, relationship building, meaningful family engagement. The result: children and their families are on enriched Jewish journeys.

Sarah, who was raised Jewish with little Jewish education, and Michelle, who is not Jewish, enrolled their family in CBST’s *Limmud b’Shabbat*, a bi-monthly opportunity for family prayer and learning. Twice each month, they join in a half hour *tefila* as a family and then Aaron joins his peers for 45 minutes of class time. Melissa describes Aaron as “a deep kid” with complex and intelligent questions. “As he has grown older,” Melissa observes, “he asked increasingly complex questions about G-d and the world and his mothers have had to seek deeper knowledge to meet that challenge.” In that way, Aaron and his family have been able to grow into their Jewish practice and identity together. Because they would like to design their own Jewish education, they will be meeting with Melissa this summer, over ice cream, to decide how they will further explore their questions and learn together as a family.

“Social action was always a value for this family,” Melissa explained. “What has changed is the context in which their values now exist. Now, they look at social action through a Jewish lens. Currently, as a family, they are designing a *mitzvah* project.” Sarah and Michelle adopted Aaron from a Guatemalan orphanage. Wanting to give something back to the place where their son spent the first years of his life, they are working together to design a special project with that orphanage. They would like to do something together as a Jewish family with Jewish values.

“What is especially powerful,” Melissa said, “is that the family is calling this project a ‘*mitzvah* project.’ Aaron is a third-grader, not yet preparing to become *bar mitzvah*. But *mitzvah* projects are not just for bar mitzvah students. It should be an ongoing effort in our lives to make change in the world. This family really gets that.”



Alef Bet Shabbat,
CBST’s Shabbat morning program for children 0-5 and their grown-ups
Photo credit: Barbara Gaines

◀ **APPLYING TORAH TO DAILY LIFE** *Continued from previous page*

that it was the building of these relationships that allowed them to take these journeys.” Lynn further explained that these families all had connections in the synagogue before going through this process. However, the kinds of relationships they have now are stronger, more meaningful relationships “that have been contextualized within the synagogue community.”

When asked how she knows that these families have developed such strong relationships, Lynn described what she often observes. “They sit together during Shabbat services. Their high-school aged kids walk into the synagogue and immediately look for the rabbi, or me, or each other. When one of the families brings their new baby to *shul*, they pass the child from hand to hand, just like a large family. This is their community.”

“This all happened,” Lynn explained, “because we learned to listen to our congregants. By truly listening to them, we were able to provide the kind of learning they wanted. Through that learning, these relationships have developed and our families have brought Judaism into every aspect of their lives.”

West End Synagogue (WES)

▶ ▶ ▶ **TAKING A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY ROOTED IN JEWISH TRADITION**



My soul is a tree growing in life.
My soul is being influenced by life
going on around it.
I thank God for everything that
life has given me so I can grow.

— "Sam" age 11

Sam came to West End Synagogue, later than most of his peers, as a fifth grader. After a year of learning with WES, Sam's work reflected his deepening spiritual journey rooted in Jewish tradition. One example of this change can be seen in the work Sam did to prepare for the annual Thanksgiving family service.

"This service," explained Education Director Sarah Chandler, "follows a Reconstructionist philosophy of bringing Judaism into the secular and the secular into Judaism." Prior to the service, Sam chose from a number of electives to prepare materials to be used in the actual service. The learning, about *Modeh Ani*, a morning prayer for giving thanks, explored the relationship between soul, God, and gratitude through the arts. It gave Sam a chance to link his secular world experiences and Jewish tradition.

The participants wrote captions for the art they created. "Many of the captions became poems," Sarah remembers. "If they had been

asked to write poems about their souls, I'm not sure they would have been able to express themselves easily. Allowing the participants to explore personal ideas through art and then reflect on what they had created changed the learning from a creative assignment to a deep reflection on their inner-spiritual lives."

After just over a year of learning with the congregation, Sam portrayed his soul – in art and in words – as a growing and changing tree with God's gifts surrounding and influencing him.

Other *Modeh Ani* Captions:

I think of my soul as the universe
because it is always growing and
more of it is always discovered and
expressed.

I thank God for keeping my uni-
verse expanding.

I think of my soul as a bird in flight
going higher each year

I think of my soul that it allows me
to be happy and sad

In order to provide privacy, the names in these stories have been changed.

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New York Coalition of Innovating Congregations

*Professional Learning
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